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Making Sense of Loss

The Disenfranchised Grief of Women Who Are “Contingently Childless”

The incidence of unintentional childlessness in women who have, as popular comment puts it, “left it too late,” is rising markedly in many western nations, yet the experience is not well understood. This paper draws on an exploratory psycho-social study of the experiences of 27 New Zealand women in their 30s and 40s who are “contingently childless”; that is women who have always seen themselves as having children but find themselves at the end of their natural fertility without having done so for social rather than (at least initially) biological reasons. They are engaged in a process of coming to terms with probably not becoming biological mothers and are in the unusual, but not uncommon, position of being neither “voluntarily childless” (since they would like to have a child), nor “involuntarily childless” (since they were/are, at least initially, biologically capable of doing so). Grief and a strong sense of loss emerged as a major theme in the study. The analysis draws on one aspect of this theme; the social “invisibility” of these women’s experience, and the ways it constructs the public and private grieving they do. The paper discusses how the perceived social illegitimacy of these women’s grief creates a painful sense of isolation and alienation for them, and contributes to the silence and lack of understanding that surrounds their experience.

Because it’s so invisible ... you struggle with it so much on your own ... you think by talking about it people are going to go “what?” That they won’t get it. (Kate 36)

The incidence of unintentional childlessness in women who have, as popular comment puts it, “left it too late,” is rising markedly in many western nations, yet the experience is not well understood. It is an experience that

appears to be constructed through a cultural silence on its very existence. In New Zealand (where the study that this paper is based on was conducted) no distinction is made in official statistics between those who are childless by decision, and those who do not have a child as a consequence of other events in their life (Boddington and Didham 3). This paper draws on an exploratory psycho-social study of the experiences of women in their 30s and 40s who are “contingently childless”; that is women who have always seen themselves as having children but find themselves at the end of their natural fertility without having done so for social rather than (at least initially) biological reasons.

I use the term “contingent childlessness” to describe the situation where a woman’s reproductive decisions are contingent on other circumstances in her life, with the aim of contributing to the possibility of a more diverse set of narratives for women who have not borne a biological child. These women are engaged in a process of coming to terms with probably not becoming biological mothers and are in the unusual, but not uncommon, position of being neither “voluntarily childless” (since they would like to have a child), nor “involuntarily childless” (since they were/are, at least initially, biologically capable of doing so). While there is a body of work on the experience of medical infertility (See for example, Becker and Nachtigall; Cussins; Greil (*Infertility and*), (*Infertile Bodies*); Inhorn and Van Balen; Thompson; Whiteford and Gonzalez), and on voluntary childlessness (See for example Bartlett; Cameron; Gillespie), there has been little research on this specific form of non-medical involuntary childlessness, particularly of women’s qualitative experience of it.

Grief and a strong sense of loss emerged as a major theme for all of the women in this study. Within that theme, there are a number of common strands: the meanings women create around the experience of not having become a biological mother when (as far as they know) they are physically capable of doing so; the ways in which they conceptualize their experience as a loss and what it is that is “lost”; the times and circumstances in which they feel the loss most keenly; the sense that loss will continue on into their futures, affecting other members of their wider family as well as themselves; the process of accommodation to the loss that they are engaged in; and the invisible nature of their experience, their loss, and the grief associated with it in their private and social worlds. In all of these strands the social and the personal are inextricably tangled and constitutive of one another, and this has implications for the ways they conceive of their experience as a loss, and grieve for it. In this paper I focus attention on the last mentioned strand; the quality of the “invisibility” of their experience and the ways it constructs and shapes the public and private grieving they do.

Research Process

In 2009/10 I conducted individual and group interviews with 26 women in their 30s and 40s from New Zealand's four major cities.¹ Respondents were recruited via their responses to information about the research promulgated in a variety of ways: posters in a large government department's head office; notices in the national newsletters of a fertility consumers' support group and of the local branch of a national organization of counselors; a university women's group email list; and personal links between some of the women I interviewed. The information about the research explained that I have worked in the past as a counselor, and several respondents commented that they were only willing to talk to me because they believed my experience would mean that I would approach the topic, and them, "gently" and sensitively. Most of the women I interviewed are university graduates, several are lecturers, and all demonstrated a considered form of self-definition and reflexivity.

I used semi-structured individual interviews of about one and a half to two hours and, in three centers, a follow-up group interview of one hour with about seven women. I invited all the women I interviewed individually to be part of a group interview; some were unwilling to do so. Time constraints in one center made it impossible to run a group interview there. The groups began with a drawing exercise where I asked each woman to draw about her experience of childlessness, and then to describe the drawing to the rest of the group. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed; pseudonyms have been used to ensure anonymity. I was interested in these women's stories and the ways they might reveal the complexities and contradictions of this aspect of their lives.

Though I was careful not to presume their experience in terms of loss and grief in my research design, I suspect for many women my having been a counselor in some way legitimated their framing their experience in their discussions with me in this way, perhaps for the first time. Perhaps because of this, there was a high level of emotionality in almost all of the individual interviews—most women cried at several points—but less so in the group interviews. I relate this to the ways that women described constraining their articulation of their experience grief publicly, and it is the origins of this constraint and the ways that it contributes to the invisibility of their particular form of childlessness that I will go on to discuss.

During the interviews, transcription, and analysis, I paid careful attention to times when their narrative faltered; in repetitions, stuttering, long pauses, and unexpected links in the narrative and so forth. These moments might be seen as possible indicators of areas where unconscious and conscious conflicts or areas of ambivalence "leak" into the carefully maintained personal and public image

a respondent has constructed of and for herself; they “make visible otherwise invisible internal states” (Hollway and Jefferson 151), which is important in a context where a woman’s private feelings might be at odds with what she judges to be socially legitimate.

The “Present Absence” of Contingent Childlessness

[It was] incredibly difficult. And still difficult ... It was difficult because [pause] um I think it was difficult because [pause], I think it was difficult because [pause] I had never [pause] and in a way still haven't, um, relinquished a, sort of [pause] sense of myself as a mother [trembling, quiet voice, tearfulness]. Um [pause], [it's] very hard to describe. (Deborah 45)

Deborah spoke articulately and strongly in her interview until this moment: the point at which I asked her to talk about how she felt about her decision, after meeting her husband in her mid thirties, not to try to have a baby. As a child she cared for a sister who has serious intellectual disability. Aware that there was a “rising risk” of disability with pregnancy at her age, she described feeling that

on the one hand we acknowledged we couldn't cope with caring for a child with disability and on the other hand we did not feel able to deny a child life [through termination that might be offered after a prenatal testing procedure] once that life had begun, for failing to be our view of “perfect.”

Like Deborah, many of the women in this study spoke in very poignant ways of the grief they felt, (and still feel) about not having had a child. Gina (46), for example, described it as “really hard. *Really* hard. And sad. I felt sad and as if I didn't belong, and I felt as if I didn't have a [pause], a signature ... that it wouldn't make any difference if I didn't exist.” They described an imaginary picture of themselves as a mother, and the child or children they had always expected to have, often in very vivid terms. Some women had named their fantasy child(ren), had developed a clear picture of what they will look like, imagined themselves interacting with them in quite specific ways and contexts, and had taken concrete steps in their life in anticipation of their future child(ren); they had bought clothes for them, chosen a house with a child in mind, and made work and career plans based on their imagined future. Kim (44) described this potential maternal subjectivity as “something that is present as an absence” in the lives of women who, like herself, have this experience. It was this sense of absence that was vividly and often painfully present in the conversations I had with the women in this study.

Alongside this powerful sense of loss there was an eagerness to talk about their experience and, through that talk, to make sense of it for themselves. The lack of a socially acknowledged space or category for these women's experience, either officially or within their more intimate social spheres, was apparent across the narratives. With little public circulation of their narrative, women struggled to make sense of their experience for themselves.

I find it quite hard to explore it, and understand it [pause]. There's times when I really could have done with some [pause] support [pause], and I, and also like I'm, you know, I know I can't be the only [pause] woman who has gone through some of the [pause] thoughts, and angst that I've been through, but you don't [pause] it's hard to read about it. Not in a kind of sophisticated [pause] intelligent way. (Lynne 39)

Lynne's comments point to the difficulties in making meaning of her life for herself, and also to the ways the invisibility of her circumstances in public discourse constrains her finding social support from others. In the excerpt that follows Maree (33) interprets these circumstances as having developed for women through a societal "shift," and suggests that the lack of understanding or awareness also carries a judgment and an inhibition about what she and other women like her might be "allowed to feel," because they should in some way carry the responsibility for their choices in life:

... it's not something that I talk about with anyone or process very much because, um, you know, there's no label or box or term for it to fit in, [pause] ... so I still, I'm not, you know, I'm not completely clear on exactly how I feel about it all [pause] ... if I'm feeling something it's hard to explain it to someone else if they don't really know of its existence ... I just think it's a shift that's occurred in society in general and hasn't been fully recognised or acknowledged, um, it's kind of crept up on us, so not really seen ... [Women] are not allowed to feel any loss about it, 'cause they've made that happen that way.

"Disenfranchised Grief"

Over the last century grief has been largely academically theorized (and popularly understood) within a psychological framework as an individual's response to bereavement when someone dies, making it difficult to consider a mechanism by which individual women might feel inhibited in grieving for the loss of their potential subjectivity as a mother and imagined child(ren), as Maree suggests. A psycho-social perspective of the experience and expression

of grief creates a different perspective for consideration of the ways women in this study might experience loss. Rather than seeing the individual as a discrete person who is impacted by a number of factors—including social and cultural factors—a psycho-social perspective is engaged with analyzing and describing the ways social interactions in effect construct the psychic life of the individual; in the case of grief, how social interactions co-construct the experience and expression of grieving, and the societal correlates of that experience. Brabant (28) writes that from this perspective “the collective response and the individual’s response to loss are inextricably interwoven. The individual grieves as an individual; he or she also grieves as a member of a social system.” A “lived” experience of grieving entails a process of social recognition and acknowledgement.

Doka’s (1989, 2002) concept of “Disenfranchised Grief,” which postulates that some grief, some losses, and some grieverers are stigmatized, minimized or rendered invisible because they fall outside of a set of normative boundaries, is a useful way to think about the experience of grief for women in these circumstances. Extending this idea, Charles Corr (*Revisiting* 41) suggests that the normative order establishes “who have a right to experience and express their reactions (to significant losses), and who can expect to have their losses and their subsequent reactions and responses to those losses acknowledged and supported by society.” Doka’s (1989, 2002) metaphor of enfranchisement evokes a rights discourse of the privileges accorded to those who belong and have a valid place in society; disenfranchisement refers therefore to those who are judged socially invalid in some important respect and who are therefore unable to have their voices heard. The metaphor carries a strong sense of the role of the social in the construction of people’s experience of grief in the suggestion that the freedom to grieve is one that is bestowed on a person—or withheld from him or her—by others.

There are a number of ways in which the participants in this study appear to fall outside the set of people who are socially permitted to grieve, and I have space here to elaborate on only two of them. The first relates to the type of loss they are dealing with. In the following excerpt, Deborah distinguished her loss from that associated with a death. Though she struggled to articulate *what* is “lost,” in her insistence that her loss is a reality she claimed her experience as “grief.” Her repetitions at the end of the excerpt however suggested a determination to defend its existence; that its validity might perhaps have been called into question socially:

It’s not loss in the sense of something known. You know how if one loses a parent, or loses a sibling ... it’s not loss in that sense, and yet it is loss of [pause], I don’t know, a vision or a hope or a dream or an expectation, or

[pause], so there is grieving that goes with it. Just, I don't know that it's the same grieving as the loss of something that was known to exist. But I think it exists. That [pause], that sense of loss, and the grieving for something not fulfilled is, you know, does, does exist. Yeah. Yes. (Deborah 45)

The process by which those around him or her disenfranchise a person's grief may be simply one of a lack of awareness, such as might be experienced by thoughtless comments made to a woman about her being "lucky" to be childfree; however Corr (*Enhancing* 4) writes that it may be much a more active one of "disavowal, renunciation, and rejection." Deborah, who described her relationship with her nieces and nephews as being extremely important to her, spoke of her outrage and hurt in a situation where she was offering to care for her brother's children:

He said to me [pause] "get your own children, and don't steal mine" [incredulous small laugh]. And I just, I was, I didn't say anything, I've never said anything to him about it . . . you know, it's [pause] it's, yeah [quavering voice]. Those are the times, I think, when I feel the pain the most, is when I get a sense that a judgment is being passed. When I feel that people have no reason to be making the judgment. (Deborah 45)

In these women's stories it is possible to see some of the features that lie underneath the construction of normative rules that define how and when people might expect public support in their grief. The second "infringement" of social laws of grieving that renders these women's right to grieve illegitimate draws on the idea that there is a natural "logic" to grieving, implying that grieving people are necessarily passive victims of circumstance; that those who have played a part in bringing about loss in their lives are by inference not eligible for support from others (and perhaps even from themselves). Maree's comment that women "are not allowed, 'cause they've made it happen that way" illustrates this point. These women often struggled with a conflict between the notion of taking personal responsibility for their lives—that they had "made their bed and now must lie on it"—and a sense of injustice that the complexities of their decisions are not acknowledged socially. For many this struggle is played out in a painful choice between staying with a man they love (who refused to have more children), and leaving him to try to have a child with someone else or on their own. Gina for example said, "(y)ou know, your calculus is choosing between this abstract scenario that might or might not work out, or this real live person that you're in love with. There's no discussion about what that's really like." In the excerpt that follows she struggled to make sense of the decision she made and the ways she understands this as constraining her

ability to seek support from others in dealing with the difficulties she felt in not having a child:

Oh it's complex isn't it. Maybe I should have made this choice [to leave her husband] long ago and ... given that I didn't, I don't have any right to gripe about it now. But I didn't want to leave him. I didn't want to leave him. And that's why I didn't. So I mean [pause] I think the implication is: it's my life, there's my desires, or putative desires, so if I [pause], I made my choice and I should not feel regret or grief about it ... [Making that choice] wipes out any avenue for complaining about it, or even talking about it really [pause]. I reckon that's a big mechanism at work in women's tendency to stay isolated and not discuss it. As a woman, as soon as you bring something up, you're implicitly seeking support, emotional support. And so you have to have the [pause] right to seek that support. (Gina 43)

For many of the women abortion plays a major role in this perceived struggle between the fruits of agency and the “right” to grieve. In the excerpts that follow Maree and Lynne discuss the complexity of their decisions and impact that abortion has had on their experience:

I had the opportunity to have a child, um, so I don't have the right to be sad about not having children ... in society's eyes, yeah. I give, I, yeah I give myself the right, privately, yeah ... I understand what, you know, 'cause it seems logical looking from the outside in, um, if a woman had the opportunity to have a child and, and didn't and then was sad about not having children that wouldn't make much sense. (Maree 33)

I think that has made it really hard for me to talk to people about it [her childlessness]. The sort of irony of wanting children and having had two abortions ... they just made me realise how hard decisions are, and how messy life is sometimes ... I was really ambivalent about it, because I was aware that actually I wanted to have children. (Lynne 39)

Along with a feeling of injustice that the “messiness” of life is not accounted for in the judgments others make, a painful sense of isolation was a very strong element in the narratives of the women in this study. It was often reflected in their drawings; many featured a single figure separated from others by a membrane of some sort. Some talked about the rejection they experienced in the very places they might have expected support; family and social connections such as church for example. Discussing the impact of this isolation due to disenfranchised grief Jeffrey Kauffman writes:

A basic part of the loss inflicted by disenfranchisement is a loss of the shelter of community. Cut off in his or her grief from social recognition, the disenfranchised griever is prone to experience an underlying sense of alienation and loneliness, shame, and abandonment. The experience of being disenfranchised by a social group alienates one from that group, and it may contribute to a degeneration of the individual's sense of being part of the social fabric. (69)

Perhaps the most serious outcomes of this isolation are the constraints the women felt in seeking support and sharing stories with others in similar circumstances. This affects the social resources they have available to them, and adds to the social invisibility of their experience. Very few of the women I interviewed told me they felt able to speak to others, and then only rarely, with perhaps one other woman. Gina's doubts about having "the right to seek support" from others is one reason for the constraint. It represents an internalizing of the societal rules about grieving in which she is immersed. In the excerpt that follows Lesley (43) suggests another reason: an awareness of the depth of her own feelings and a fear that she might "open a Pandora's box" of difficult feelings for them:

[I don't talk] even with close friends. Mainly just because I think I would, you know, cry a lot, like I have this morning. And I just don't want to do that. And I actually don't know how some of my other friends have come to terms with it, and to what extent they are sitting on the same sort of emotional depth that I am. (Lesley 43)

Conclusion

I'm really hoping that people ... are more aware that there is that invisible grief out there, that it's brought out more into the open, and so it's normalised that it's actually something that people might be going through. I think ... people knowing about it and opening it up for conversations ... I'm hoping that's what this research would be able to help. (Kate 36)

Conceiving of grief as a social construct makes it possible to consider how different conceptualizations of grief might shape the ways women who are "contingently childless" understand and articulate their experience. If, for example, "contingent childlessness" is not socially recognized as a loss, then women who may be grieving for the loss of their fantasy child or identity as a mother may not conceive of and articulate their experience as grief. Similarly, if grief is understood as a passive process whereby a grieving woman is positioned

as a victim of her circumstances—someone others might pity perhaps—a woman who sees herself as taking an agentive stance in her life may question the legitimacy of her own grief. This raises the possibility that women may not talk about their experience in terms of loss, and their response in terms of grief, for a range of reasons: they may reject the notion of loss and subsequent grief because to do so positions them as victims of their circumstances rather than as agentive selves making active choices in their lives; they may not see themselves as having “valid” loss in the way that women who have always been biologically infertile do, or they may not conceptualize it as a loss since no one has died and their loss is not validated as such by others. This study has highlighted the invisible nature of these women’s experience, and of their grieving. It is hoped that it can contribute to a growing understanding of the complexities of this experience.

¹The study has approval from University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee.

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